

Filigree Ball

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN,

Author of "The Mystery of Agatha Webb," "Lost Man's Lane," Etc.

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The arch little creature started to move off again. As she did so she cried, "Be good, and don't let Durbin cut in on you," but stopped for the second time when half across the street, and when, obedient to her look, I hastily rejoined her, she whispered demurely: "Oh, I forgot to tell you something that I heard this morning and that nobody but yourself has any right to know. I was following your commands and buying groceries at Simpkins' when, just as I was coming out with my arms full, I heard old Mr. Simpkins mention Mr. Jeffrey's name and with such interest that I naturally wanted to hear what he had to say. Having no real excuse for staying, I poked my finger into a bag of sugar I was carrying till the sugar ran out, and I had to wait till it was put up again. This did not take long, but it took long enough for me to hear the old grocer say that he knew Mr. Jeffrey and that that gentleman had come into his shop only a day or two before his wife's death to buy—candles!"

The archness with which this was said, together with the fact itself, made me her slave forever. As her small figure faded from sight down the avenue I decided to take her advice and follow up whatever communication she had to make to the coroner by a confession of my own suspicions and what they had led me into. If he laughed—well, I could stand it. It was not the coroner's laugh nor even the major's that I feared. It was Durbin's.

CHAPTER X.

JINNY had not been gone an hour from the coroner's office when an opportunity was afforded for me to approach that gentleman myself.

With few apologies and no preamble I immediately entered upon my story, which I made as concise and as much to the point as possible. I did not expect praise from him, but I did look for some slight show of astonishment at the nature of my news. I was therefore greatly disappointed when after a moment's quiet consideration he carelessly remarked:

"Very good, very good! The one point you make is excellent and may prove of use to us. We had reached the same conclusion, but by another road. You ask, 'Who blew out the candle?' We, 'Who tied the pistol to Mrs. Jeffrey's arm?' It could not have been tied by herself. Who was her accessory, then? Ah, you didn't think of that."

I flushed as if a pail of hot water had been dashed suddenly over me. He was right. The conclusion he spoke of had failed to strike me. Why? It was a perfectly obvious one, as obvious as that the candle had been blown out by another breath than hers; yet, absorbed in my own train of thought, I had completely overlooked it. The coroner, observing my embarrassment, smiled, and my humiliation was complete, or would have been had Durbin been there, but fortunately he was not.

"I am a fool," I cried. "I thought I had discovered something. I might have known that there were keener minds than mine in this office!"

"Easy—easy," was the good natured interruption. "You have done well. If I did not think so I would not keep you here a minute. As it is, I am disposed to let you see that in a case like this one man must not expect to monopolize all the honors. This matter of the bow of ribbon would strike any old and experienced official. I only wonder that we have not seen it openly discussed in the papers."

Taking a box from his desk, he opened it and held it out toward me. A coil of white ribbon surmounted by a crisp and dainty bow met my eyes.

"You recognize it?" he asked.

Indeed I did.

"It was cut from her wrist by my deputy. Miss Tuttle wished him to untie it, but he preferred to leave the bow intact. Now lift it out. Careful, man; don't soil it. You will see why in a minute." As I held the ribbon up he pointed to some spots on its fresh white surface. "Do you see those?" he asked. "Those are dark marks, and they were made as truly by some one's fingers as the impressions you noted on the mantelshelf in the upper chamber. This pistol was tied to her wrist after the deed; possibly by that same hand."

It was my own conclusion, but it did not sound as welcome to me from his lips as I had expected. Either my nature is narrow or my inordinate jealousy lays me open to the most astonishing inconsistencies, for no sooner had he spoken these words than I experienced a sudden revulsion against my own theory and the suspicions which it threw upon the man whom an hour before I was eager to proclaim a criminal.

But Coroner Z. gave me no chance for making such a fool of myself. Rescuing the ribbon from my hands, which no doubt were running a little too freely over its snowy surface, he smiled with the indulgence proper from such a man to a novice like myself and observed quite frankly:

"You will consider these observations as confidential. You know how to hold

your tongue; that you have proved. Hold it, then, a little longer. The case is not yet ripe. Mr. Jeffrey is a man of high standing, with a hitherto unblemished reputation. It won't do, my boy, to throw the doubt of so hideous a crime upon so fine a gentleman without ample reason. That no such mistake may be made and that he may have every opportunity for clearing himself I am going to have a confidential talk with him. Do you want to be present?"

I flushed again, but this time from extreme satisfaction.

"I am obliged for your confidence," said I. Then, with a burst of courage born of his good nature, I inquired, with due respect, if my little friend had answered his expectations. "Was she as clever as I said?" I asked.

"Your little friend is a trump," was his blunt reply. "With what we have learned through her, and now through you, we can approach Mr. Jeffrey to some purpose. It appears that before

leaving the house on that Tuesday

morning he had an interview with his wife which ought in some way to account for this tragedy. Perhaps he will tell us about it, and perhaps he will explain how he came to wander through the Moore house while his wife lay dying below. At all events, we will give him the opportunity to do so and if possible to clear up mysteries which provoke the worst kind of conjecture. It is time. The ideas advanced by the papers foster superstition, and superstition is the devil. Go and tell my man out there that I am going to K street. You may say 'we' if you like," he added, with a humor more welcome to me than any serious concession.

Did I feel set up by this? Rather. Mr. Jeffrey was expecting us. This was evident from his first look, though the attempt he made at surprise was instantaneous and very well feigned. Indeed, I think he was in a constant state of apprehension during these days and that no inroad of the police would have astonished him. But expectation does not preclude dread—indeed, it tends to foster it—and dread was in his heart. This he had no power to conceal.

"To what am I indebted for this second visit from you?" he asked of Coroner Z., with an admirable presence of mind. "Are you not yet satisfied with what we have been able to tell you of my poor wife's unhappy end?"

"We are not," was the plain response. "There are some things you have not attempted to explain. Mr. Jeffrey—for instance, why you went to the Moore house previous to your being called there by the death of your wife?"

It was a shot that told, an arrow which found its mark. Mr. Jeffrey flushed, then turned pale, rallied and again lost himself in a maze of conflicting emotions, from which he only emerged to say:

"How do you know that I was there? Have I said so, or do those old walls babble in their sleep?"

"Old walls have been known to do this," was the grave reply. "Whether they had anything to say in this case is at present quite immaterial. That you were where I charge you with being is evident from your own manner. May I then ask if you have anything to say about this visit? When a person has died under such peculiar circumstances as Mrs. Jeffrey, everything bearing upon the case is of interest to the coroner."

"Mrs. Jeffrey's death was a strange one," her husband admitted, with tardy self control. "I find myself as much at a loss to understand it as you do and am therefore quite ready to answer the question you have so openly broached; not that my answer has any bearing upon the point you wish to make, but because it is your due and my pleasure. I did visit the Moore house, as I certainly had every right to do. The property was my wife's, and it was for my interest to learn if I could the secret of its many crimes."

"Ah!"

Mr. Jeffrey looked quickly up. "You think that an odd thing for me to do?"

"At night—yes."

"Night is the time for such work. I did not care to be seen pottering around there in daylight."

"No? Yet it would have been so much easier. You would not have had to buy candles or carry a pistol or—"

"I did not carry a pistol. The only pistol carried there was the one with which my demented wife chose to take her life. I do not understand this allusion."

"It grew out of a misunderstanding of the situation, Mr. Jeffrey. Excuse me if I supposed you would be likely to provide yourself with some means of defense in venturing alone upon the

scene of so many mysterious deaths."

"I took no precaution."

"And needed none, I suppose."

"And needed none."

"When was this visit paid, Mr. Jeffrey—before or after your wife pulled the trigger which ended her life? You need not hesitate to answer."

"I do not." The elegant gentleman before us had acquired a certain fierceness. "Why should I? Certainly you don't think that I was there at the same time she was. It was not on the same night even. So much the walls should have told you and probably did, or my wife's uncle, Mr. David Moore. Was he not your informant?"

"No. Mr. Moore has failed to call our attention to this fact. Did you meet Mr. Moore during the course of your visit to a neighborhood over which he seems to hold absolute sway?"

"Not to my knowledge. But his house is directly opposite, and as he has little to do but amuse himself with what he can see from his front window I concluded that he might have observed me going in."

"You entered by the front door, then?"

"How else?"

"And on what night?"

Mr. Jeffrey made an effort. These questions were visibly harassing him. "The night before the one—the one which ended all my earthly happiness," he added in a low voice.

Coroner Z. cast a glance at me. I remembered the lack of dust on the nest of little tables from which the upper one had been drawn forward to hold the candelabrum and gently shook my head. The coroner's eyebrows went up, but none of his disbelieved crept into his voice as he made this additional statement:

"The night on which you failed to return to your own house."

Instantly Mr. Jeffrey betrayed by a nervous action, which was quite involuntary, that his outward calm was slowly giving way under a fire of questions for which he had no ready reply.

"It was odd your not going home that night," the coroner coldly pursued. "The misunderstanding you had with your wife immediately after breakfast must have been a very serious one, more serious than you have hitherto acknowledged."

"I had rather not discuss the subject," protested Mr. Jeffrey. Then as if he suddenly recognized the official character of his interlocutor he hastily added, "Unless you positively request me to do so, in which case I must."

"I am afraid that I must insist upon it," returned the other. "You will find that it will be insisted upon at the inquest, and if you do not wish to subject yourself to much unnecessary unpleasantness you had better make clear to us today the cause of that special quarrel which to all intents and purposes led to your wife's death."

"I will try to do so," returned Mr. Jeffrey, rising and pacing the room in his intense restlessness. "We did have some words. Her conduct the night before had not pleased me. I am naturally jealous, vitally jealous, and I thought she was a little frivolous at the German ambassador's ball. But I had no idea she would take my sharp speeches so much to heart. I had no idea that she would care so much or that I should care so much. A little jealousy is certainly pardonable in a bridegroom, and if her mind had not already been upset she would have remembered how I loved her and hopefully waited for a reconciliation."

"You did love your wife, then?" It was you and not she who had a right to be jealous? I have heard the contrary stated. It is a matter of public gossip that you loved another woman previous to your acquaintance with Miss Moore, a woman whom your wife regarded with sisterly affection and subsequently took into her new home."

"Miss Tuttle?" Mr. Jeffrey stopped in his walk to fling out this ejaculation. "I admire and respect Miss Tuttle," he went on to declare, "but I never loved her—not as I did my wife," he finished, but with a certain hard accent, apparent enough to a sensitive ear.

"Pardon me, it is as difficult for me to put these questions as it is for you to hear them—were you and Miss Tuttle ever engaged?"

I started. This was a question which half of Washington had been asking itself for the last three months.

Would Mr. Jeffrey answer it, or, remembering that these questions were rather friendly than official, refuse to satisfy a curiosity which he might well consider intrusive? The set aspect of his features promised little in the way of information, and we were both surprised when a moment later he responded with a grim emphasis hardly to be expected from one of his impulsive temperament:

"Unhappily, no. My attentions never went so far."

Instantly the coroner pounced on the one weak word which Mr. Jeffrey had let fall.

"Unhappily?" he repeated. "Why do you say 'unhappily'?"

Mr. Jeffrey flushed and seemed to come out of some dream.

"Did I say 'unhappily'?" he inquired. "Well, I repeat it—Miss Tuttle would never have given me any cause for jealousy."

The coroner bowed and for the present dropped her name out of the conversation.

"You speak again of the jealousy aroused in you by your wife's impetuosity. Was this increased or diminished by the tone of the few lines she left behind her?"

The response was long in coming. It was hard for this man to lie. The struggle he made at it was pitiful. As I noted what it cost him, I began to have new and curious thoughts concerning him and the whole matter under discussion.

"I shall never overcome the remorse roused in me by those few lines," he

finally rejoined. "She showed a consideration for me!"

"What?"

The coroner's exclamation showed all the surprise he felt. Mr. Jeffrey tottered under it, then grew slowly pale, as if only through our amazed looks he had come to realize the charge of inconsistency to which he had laid himself open.

"I mean," he endeavored to explain, "that Mrs. Jeffrey showed an unexpected tenderness toward me by taking all the blame of our misunderstanding upon herself. It was generous of her and will do much toward making my memory of her a gentle one."

He was forgetting himself again. Indeed his manner and attempted explanations were full of contradictions. To emphasize this fact Coroner Z. exclaimed:

"I should think so! She paid a heavy penalty for her professed lack of love. You believe that her mind was unseated?"

"Does not her action show it?"

"Unseated by the mishap occurring at her marriage?"

"Yes."

"You really think that?"

"Yes."

"By anything that passed between you?"

"Yes."

"May I ask you to tell us what passed between you on this point?"

"Yes."

He had uttered the monosyllable so often it seemed to come unconsciously from his lips. But he recognized almost as soon as we did that it was not a natural reply to the last question, and, making a gesture of apology, he added, with the same monotony of tone which had characterized these replies:

"She spoke of her strange guest's unaccountable death more than once, and whenever she did so it was with an unnatural excitement and in an unbalanced way. This was so noticeable to us all that the subject presently via taboos among us, but though she henceforth spared us all allusion to it she continued to talk about the house itself and of the previous deaths which had occurred there till we were forced to forbid that topic also. She was never really herself after crossing the threshold of this desolate house to be married. The shadow which lurks within its walls fell at that instant upon her life. May God have mercy!"

The prayer remained unfinished. His head, which had fallen on his breast, sank lower.

He presented the aspect of one who is quite done with life, even its sorrows.

But men in the position of Coroner Z. cannot afford to be compassionate. Everything the bereaved man said deepened the impression that he was acting a part. To make sure that this was really so the coroner, with just the slightest touch of sarcasm, quietly observed:

"And to ease your wife's mind—the wife you were so deeply angered with—you visited this house and, at an hour which you should have spent in reconciliation with her, went through its ancient rooms in the hope—of what?"

Mr. Jeffrey could not answer. The words which came from his lips were mere ejaculations.

"I was restless, mad. I found this adventure diverting. I had no real purpose in mind."

"Not when you looked at the old picture?"

"The old picture? What old picture?"

"The old picture in the southwest chamber. You took a look at that, didn't you—got up on a chair on purpose to do so?"

Mr. Jeffrey winced, but he made a direct reply.

"Yes; I gave a look at that old picture; got up, as you say, on a chair to do so. Wasn't that the freak of an idle man, wandering, he hardly knows why, from room to room in an old and deserted house?"

His tormentor did not answer. Probably his mind was on his next line of inquiry. But Mr. Jeffrey did not take his silence with the calmness he had shown prior to the last attack. As no word came from his unwelcome guest, he paused in his rapid pacing and, casting aside with one impulsive gesture his hitherto imperfectly held restraint, he cried out sharply:

"Why do you ask me these questions in tones of such suspicion? Is it not plain enough that my wife took her own life under a misapprehension of my state of mind toward her? Why should you feel it necessary to rake up these personal matters, which, however interesting to the world at large, are of a painful nature to me?"

"Mr. Jeffrey," retorted the other, with a sudden grave assumption of dignity not without its effect in a case of such serious import, "we do nothing without purpose. We ask these questions and show this interest because the charge of suicide which has hitherto been made against your wife is not entirely sustained by the facts. At least she was not alone when she took her life. Some one was in the house with her."

It was startling to observe the effect of this declaration upon him.

"Impossible!" he cried out in a protest as forcible as it was agonized.

"You are playing with my misery. She could have had no one there; she would not. There is not a man living before whom she would have fired that deadly shot unless it was myself—unless it was my own wretched, miserable self."

The remorseful whisper in which those final words were uttered carried them to my heart, which for some strange and unaccountable reason had been gradually turning toward this man. But my less easily affected companion, seeing his opportunity and possibly considering that it was this gen-

tleman's right to know in what a doubtful light he stood before the law, remarked with as light a touch of irony as was possible:

"You should know better than we in whose presence she would choose to die—if she did so choose, also who would be likely to tie the pistol to her wrist and blow out the candle when the dreadful deed was over."

The laugh which seemed to be the only means of violent expression remaining to this miserable man was kept down by some amazing thought which seemed to paralyze him. Without making any attempt to refute a suggestion that felt just short of a personal accusation, he sank down in the first chair he came to and became, as it were, lost in the vision of that ghastly ribbon tying and the solitary blowing out of the candle upon this scene of mournful death. Then, with a struggling sense of having heard something which called for answer, he rose blindly to his feet and managed to let fall these words:

"You are mistaken. No one was there, or, if any one was, it was not I. There is a man in this city who can prove it."

But when Mr. Jeffrey was asked to give the name of this man he showed confusion and presently was obliged to admit that he could neither recall his name nor remember anything about him, but that he was some one whom he knew well and who knew him well. He affirmed that the two had met and spoken near Soldiers' home shortly after the sun went down and that the man would be sure to remember this meeting if we could only find him.

As Soldiers' home was several miles from the Moore house and quite out of the way of all his accustomed haunts, Coroner Z. asked him how he came to be there. He replied that he had just come from the Rock Creek cemetery; that he had been in a wretched state of mind all day, and, possibly being influenced by what he had heard of the yearly vigils Mr. Moore was in the habit of keeping there, had taken a notion to stroll among the graves in search of the rest and peace of mind he had failed to find in his aimless walks about the city. At least, that was the way he chose to account for the meeting he mentioned. Falling in to reverie again, he seemed to be trying to recall the name which at this moment was of such importance to him. But it was without avail, as he presently acknowledged.

(To be continued)

Rev. Carlisle P. B. Martin, L. L. D.

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Mrs. T. M. Stone returned from Brownwood Saturday.

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